

## IN MEMORIAM: NORBERT SCHOENAUER

A READING BY ADRIAN SHEPPARD

The last time I spoke publicly about Norbert Schoenauer was to introduce him at an OAQ ceremony, when he was awarded the Order's *Médaille de Mérite* for his lifetime achievements and his contribution to architecture. This was a happy occasion.

Norbert revealed his true nature, one of modesty, directness and commitment. He asked me to dispense with praise and make my introduction brief. He preferred that I talk about love of teaching, friendship and dedication to métier. But I disregarded his wishes. How could one talk about Norbert without recalling his accomplishments and his very full life? He was embarrassed and uncomfortable about being in the limelight. When he took the podium, he spoke softly of his great concern about the state of the modern world and architecture. His message, in brief, was that his life's commitment should now become our commitment.

Norbert was born seventy-nine years ago in Transylvania. He lost his father while still a student at the Lyceum. His uncle, an architect, became his surrogate father and oversaw his education during these formative years. Eventually Norbert decided to follow in his footsteps and become an architect as well. And so, in 1945, he obtained his degree from the Technical University of Budapest. Little did he know that 56 years later his alma mater would offer him the title of *Doctor of Libera Arte, Honoris Causa* for his splendid book, SIX THOUSAND YEARS OF HOUSING.

The upheavals of war and Hungary's political turmoil led him to flee his native land to Denmark where he was received as a political refugee. It was there that he met Astrid, who was to become his wife of fifty years. But his real dream was of North America, and so in 1950 Astrid and he set off for the new world. Norbert became enamoured with Canada and his adopted city of Montreal at once. However, the early years here were far from easy. It was a time of cultural adjustment, of want, of solitude, of hard work, of learning yet another language. Later in life, Norbert would remark that it was then that he learned the meaning of perseverance, of discipline, and the will to succeed. He referred to this period as the intellectually and morally formative phase of his adult life.

In Montreal, Norbert worked long hours and as soon as he had the wherewithal, returned to his studies, this time at the School of Architecture at McGill. He received his Master of Architecture degree in 1959. The following year, John Bland, invited him to join the faculty of the School. And so began a brilliant academic career that was to last more than 40 years.

Norbert was a child of the war. He often made references to the difficult period of his youth

and said that he would never inflict unto others the injustices he had endured. He treated all as equals. He had simply no prejudices about others. In forty years, I never heard him make a disparaging remark about other cultures or places. I never heard him make a sexist comment. He loved telling colourful jokes but never one that denigrated others. In point of fact, when he did refer to another race, culture, or nation, it was with admiration because of what he had learned from the values they embraced. Norbert was, above all else, a modest man. He sought simple things, friendship, good books, jazz, the beauties of nature. Because possessions were a burden to him, he amassed few material things in life.

I met Norbert while we were both attending McGill. He was a graduate student, while I was still an undergraduate. Despite a real age difference, we struck a friendship that was to last all my adult life. We had a common European background, similar interests, and a mutual sympathy. A few years after he completed his studies, Norbert went into private practice and later invited me to join in the design of the new town of Fermont in northern Quebec. Eventually we became full professional partners, but in 1977 he abandoned practice to return full-time to teaching. I followed him in 1979, and once again we became colleagues, this time at McGill University.

Norbert was a highly principled person who repeatedly lamented the lack of morals and ethical behaviour in our world. He ardently believed that values could only be taught by example, not by moralising. Leadership is essentially a moral act, an assertion of a vision, and Norbert was indisputably a leader. He once refused a commission of the scale and importance of Fermont when it became clear that he could not serve the client, and especially the users, according to his ideals. He abstained because it was the moral thing to do.

In practice as in life, Norbert was a man of reason. He disliked the arbitrary, the impulsive, the subjective. Architecture was an exercise of the mind, not a mystical endeavour that spoke to only the few. He felt that every move, every detail had to have a demonstrable *raison d'être*. He shunned formalism, clever games and unnecessary complications. He believed in the modern notion that nothing is ever completed or immutable. It was a tacit acknowledgement that life goes on, and that the design of a finite product was a lifeless act. He preferred the term *organism* to *composition* when discussing his work. Serge Chermayeff once said: "I am afraid of simple answers: I am extremely interested in simple questions". This dictum could well have been Norbert's credo.

Norbert loved the academic milieu. He cherished its social landscape, its freedom, and its mix of activities. He was particularly appreciative of being able to operate in an environment that lay outside the pressures of the marketplace. For this reason, he rebuked the university's proclivity for corporate habits and corporate ethics. The university was his extended family, his source of intellectual and emotional sustenance, and the epicentre of his social life, especially in later years. He enjoyed the world of pure thought, and he had an immense fondness for his students.

For Norbert, the university was a place of conversation between young and old. And, he loved to talk, to explain, to tell stories and jokes, to gossip, to debate. Both colleagues and students would talk to him at any time, for any reason, on any subject. To all, he was a mentor, an advisor, a father confessor, someone to bounce ideas off. His door was never, never closed.

Norbert knew that the journey of education is lifelong. He was a great teacher because he remained ever the student. The University, for him, was not a place of "them-and-us" but one where older and younger come together to learn, to teach, to converse, to share. A place where experience and speculation, discovery and wisdom meet. He dedicated his first book, *THE INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS HOUSING*, to, and I quote, "my students who unknowingly taught me".

Norbert's intellectual passion was history -- architectural, political, cultural, and art history. He used history to help him understand the world. And though he was keenly interested in the past, he was in no way sentimental about it. He was neither pessimistic nor optimistic about the future. Norbert was a person of the present. He loved the here-and-now, the everyday, the things he could experience in a direct way. We often walked home together, and he would make observations on what we encountered, be it people, buildings, or simply the sky. He would stop to smell a flower, or to pick up a shiny fresh chestnut. The small details of life were not trivial.

During his last weeks in hospital, I visited him almost daily, most often with his dear friend Andrew Hoffmann. We read to him when he could no longer hold a book. Despite his deteriorating physical condition, Norbert's mind remained astonishingly alert and his desire to exchange ideas as strong as ever. The last book we read together was *EASTWARD TO TARTARY*, which dealt with the past and present of the Balkans, his homeland. Even during his weakest moments, Norbert would interrupt us and explain some historical detail to make the tale more interesting for Andrew and me. This was Norbert's act of generosity: he wanted us to enjoy the book as much as he did.

We, who were his colleagues, partners, students, and friends are fortunate. Norbert gave so much, he was ever-present, he was fun, and he was wise. His idealism was contagious; his concern for the public good had no limit. Room 308, his office, which is next to mine, feels very empty. I, like so many of us, still have the impulse to go to room 308 for advice or reassurance. Without Norbert, our School will never be the same. We miss the man. We miss his soft accent. We miss his wonderful tales. We miss his camaraderie. We miss his wisdom.

*Montreal*  
*McGill University Chapel*

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